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[TITLE PAGE]

7:Fry D-5 (1913) 1949 O120 Tiwi O120

A Bathurst Island Mourning Rite.

Sir:

121 Late in February, 1913, word came to Darwin that a fatal epidemic was prevalent in Bathurst and Melville Islands, and I was instructed to visit the islands and do anything possible to help.

122 I arrived at the Roman Catholic Mission Station at the southern end of Apsley Strait on Bathurst Island on March 2nd, and four days later, with the kindly assistance of Father Coudreau, set off up the Strait in a ten-foot sailing dinghy with a Malay, Matthew Gar, who had a smattering of the native language, two adult islanders, Mari and Dulin, a small native boy, Olinyarra, and stores. On the fourth day at Marinlampi, about two miles from Point Brace, at the northern end of the strait, a native camp was found. There were about thirty natives in the group, variously painted.

765 An old man, later found to be named Kerbo, was sitting chanting beside a small heap of red stones in the centre of a cleared circle about twelve feet in diameter. A pile of cooked yams was beside him and he was

[177] scraping them with a mission-given knife. The time of my arrival was about ten in the morning. A small boy squatted beside the old man at times but otherwise the natives lounged about outside the circle indifferently coming and going. It appeared that a death ceremony was in progress. A woman sitting with her three boys under a pandanus palm nearby was pointed out as the mother of the dead man. When all the yams had been peeled the old man walked about in

[595] the circle chanting and clacking two sticks together. There was an intermission until about 2 p.m., when the old man resumed his chanting. About 4 p.m. he returned again and proceeded to cut up the yams, placing

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765 the pieces in a bark bag, with intervals of walking and chanting. The crowd had now invaded his circle and his walking was confined to a small sector of the circle. Once he washed his hands, head and beard with water and retired to eat. When he had finished, the small boy brought a bark bag of water, which he emptied into the bag containing the cut-up yams. After dark, about 7.30, the old man began to chant again [535] within the circle. He was joined by a number of men, and they shuffled around chanting, slapping their buttocks, and dragging one foot. Finally they shouted and then moved off in single file to a small water channel in the grass nearby. The grass was trodden down and the old man tipped the yams into the water, while the chorus beat their buttocks and cried "Broop." A shout was given and they then dispersed.

During the night the old man chanted at intervals. At sunrise he was seen standing beneath a palm rubbing himself with ochre, and the small boy attending him. He chanted and others joined him. They filed down to the creek, where a shout like "R-r-r-r-p" was given. The old man started to eat the yams and others followed. They then returned to the circle and cleared it by scraping outwards with their feet, tufts of grass and pieces of bark being thrown away. The stones from the central pile were placed round the edge of the circle. The old man took three small stones from the centre and threw them a few feet into the air, with the shout of "R-r-r-r-p." The ceremony was finished.

The language difficulty was formidable, but I learned that I had broken in on the third day of the ceremony. On the first day palm nuts (*kwawka*) had been gathered and eaten. On the second day yams had been collected and had been cooked at sunrise on the third day. I was told that

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I was told that

765 the old man had chanted about the *Tarula*,[1]
533 who had planted magic on the beaches to
754 the north at the beginning of the wet season.
[648] The sun heated the magic, and up it went like smoke and the wind blew it all about. The magic works on the blackfellow with a feeling like a snake crawling up the legs. It moves up to his stomach, and when it reaches his heart he eats no more and dies. He also sang that he was an old man, his wind was short and soon he would die. Later he sang of a fight he had had with another tribe. Later he sang of people who came and fed him while he was sick. When standing in the water he was calling on the others to make the ceremony. When he threw up the stones he called *wei tua*, i.e "finish."

754 During the next four weeks I visited tribes in various parts of the islands and heard the same story. I was shown a sample of the magic. It was a tightly woven string bag about the size of a billiard ball and stuffed with kapok. This was said to have been "sung" before it was buried.

124 Statistics of the mortality of the epidemic
902 presented a problem. The only words for numbers which I could obtain with certainty

[1] The *tarula* were mainland blacks in the employ of local white men. They were called *tarula* ("lightning") after the guns carried by their employers.

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124 were *yadi*, *irrara*, *irradroma*, *arkwawi* and
802 *inalli*, respectively one, two, three, few and many. Some natives had a vague idea of five and ten. A nominal roll of the dead
[551] was impossible, as the names of the dead are *ardjidil*, "unlawful," "taboo." A method was arranged whereby flat sticks were used and notched. Separate sticks were taken for males and for females. A group would sit about and the dead identified by relationship with the living. A big notch in the sticks would be made for each adult, a smaller notch for a child, and a tiny notch for a baby. Records obtained in this way
165 showed that at least 56 men, 87 women, 17 boys, 25 girls and one male and one female infant had died. The population of the islands, before the epidemic, was estimated as a result of general enquiries to be about 650, so the known death roll of 187 indicates a high mortality rate.

The original rumour suggested that the natives were dying of measles, as someone had diagnosed some illnesses at the Mission about Christmas time as measles. The extremely low number of infant deaths was entirely against measles being the cause of the holocaust, and supports the native diagnosis of magic.

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